



“Observing” the Italian Language

Vito Cerulli (October 17, 2011)



i-Italy interviews Calandra Institute’s Dean Anthony Julian Tamburri about the new website www.UsSpeaksItalian.org.

What are the origins of www.UsSpeaksItalian.org [2]?

The website was born out of discussions that were initially related to the re-implementation of the Advanced Placement Program in Italian. What had become apparent was that, in spite of the existence of something like the AATI (American Association of Teachers of Italian), COPILAS (Council for the Promotion of the Italian Language in American Schools), and the more recent Italian Language Foundation, there was also a need for a forum that teachers of Italian from K-12 could



consult and, as with the “Reserved Area,” where these same teachers can also virtually meet and exchange ideas.

As we moved forward working toward the re-instatement of the AP in Italian, we realized that a larger forum for teachers might prove useful. Thus, through a collaboration of the [Embassy of Ital](#) [3]y and other Italian and Italian-American agencies with the Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations, an ad-hoc working group was formed. Since its inception, that group has transformed itself into a more permanent entity, the “Osservatorio” (Observatory), whose members are listed on our website.

What is the main goal of this “Osservatorio” / “Observatory”?

The “Osservatorio”'s main concern is to assure that the myriad of activities aimed at the development and the diffusion of the Italian language and culture in the United States be as best coordinated as possible. In this sense, the site offers a plethora of information on various topics such as the current state of the teaching and learning of Italian in the United States, the numerous agencies that assist in the promotion of Italian, a special section on AP Italian, and a “news” section that announces among other things scholarships and updates. There is also a section on the various opportunities that arise, from time to time, for both teachers and students. There is, as well, a section entitled that will soon have a list of American schools and universities that teach Italian, with special attention to those high schools that offer AP courses.

So, then, this site is open both to teachers as well as to the public at large?

Yes, exactly! The site is opened to the public as well. Indeed, we need to be sure that, along with the professionals, our teachers, those members of the public at large who are interested in the teaching of Italian should be as informed as possible. For example, parents who wish to have Italian in their districts where it may currently not be offered will certainly be able to obtain information on how they might strategize to have Italian included. COPILAS, for instance, already has a suggested plan that parents can readily modify to their local needs. The same goes for those people who wish to have the AP in Italian offered at their district schools; they need to know how to implement a strategy.

Well, tell us, how will this site function? How is it set up?

The site is a collaborative effort that consists of various members whom, together, we can readily consider a type of “advisory board.” They are individuals who are at the helm of Italian language and cultural organizations. Some of these people are then part of three specific groups/committees: “Teacher Group,” “Student Group,” and “Communications Group.” These groups each have their own tasks: the first will identify initiatives and incentives for teachers of Italian; the second will identify efficient ways of informing family members, schools and students of the opportunities offered by studying Italian; the third will tackle issues of publicizing online information on Italian in the United States as well as creating an information platform between interested parties and teachers, in particular, for mutual support and exchange of ideas.

Who is in charge? Who is going to do the work?

The site itself will be administered by a small group of high schools teachers who teach an array of classes from elementary level to AP courses. They will respond to emails, provide pertinent information, and handle other matters that we will eventually need to develop and implement. As questions arise, the members of the Observatory will tackle these and other issues that come to the fore. As I said before, we can look at the Observatory group as the typical “advisory board” whereas our small group of teachers administering the site is the “editorial board.”

What we envision as one of the most important features of the site is interaction among teachers for a productive exchange of ideas for pedagogical developments in and outside of the classroom, as mentioned above. We see the implementation of such also through the integration of the site with social media such as Facebook and Twitter. It will allow for a timely and expedient mode of communication that, until now, has really not existed.



Indeed, the link with Facebook and Twitter should encourage, above all, the participation of students of all ages. We see them as the true “protagonists” of our website. Through these two social networks, especially, they will be able to share their ideas about Italian language and culture, express their interests in various aspects of learning Italian, thus creating a lively and productive debate on the great opportunities offered by studying Italian language and culture.

Such interaction of this sort also allows students to contact us at the Observatory — indeed, we urge them to do so — and let us know how we might help them in contacting their schools in order to provide all the assistance necessary for the implementation of new Italian language and culture courses. Ultimately, we see many of them as the next generation of teachers of Italian.

What is your role in the Observatory?

My role is similar to other members of the Observatory: to contribute in the best way possible as my professional preparation allows, in conjunction with the many talents of my colleagues of the Observatory, so that we can secure, as best we can for future generations, that Italian will indeed be available in as many schools as possible for those who wish to study it.

What else do we need to tell our readers?

Well, as someone who has been involved in teaching Italian since the early 1970s, I believe this is the first time that we have seen such a collaboration of the Italian and Italian-American communities; they have truly come together as a unique group for the teaching of Italian. In the past, numerous organizations have offered assistance as single groups; I remember a [NIAF \(National Italian American Foundation\)](#) [4] meeting back, I believe, in 1990, if memory serves me well; and in 2004 [ILICA \(Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance\)](#) [5] hosted more than 100 teachers at a major conference on Italian language. This time, however, these and numerous other groups coalesced, and I believe we are better off for it.

Through the original crisis of the Advanced Placement Program in Italian of a few years ago, we have been able to find a linguistic and cultural united front. For those of us involved in Italian and Italian-American Studies on a daily basis, this is a most hopeful sign of further encouragement, that through dialogue and debate we can move forward in a most informed and constructive manner.

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Links

[1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/screenshot1318882280.jpg>

[2] <http://www.USspeaksitalian.org>

[3] http://www.ambwashingtondc.esteri.it/Ambasciata_Washington

[4] <http://www.niaf.org/>

[5] <http://www.i-italy.org>